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ABSTRACT

The paper elaborates on communication techniques that can promote a sense of community in both the conventional classroom and online community college courses. To help students acquire a sense of recognition by their instructor, a personal note from the instructor acknowledging a student's improvement or expressing concern about a student's lack of progress can be attached to a returned test or paper. The sense of connection between individual students is also important. For classroom projects involving small groups, the instructor can post "project partners" on a Web site and assign specific topics for each group to explore. Online courses work particularly well with partners or groups. Digital cameras offer another medium for interaction in online classes. Photos of individual students can be included on the Web page for that class, and during the semester, students can put a "face" to an e-mail address. Finally, chat rooms offer students an opportunity to engage in relevant discussions with classmates. They can be incorporated in the requirements for a conventional class as a means of fostering open communication among students and instructors. Chat rooms also offer the closest approximation to a conventional classroom discussion for students in online courses. (JA)

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Community colleges have a dual obligation to reflect the community they serve and to create an educational community through their classes. Community college instructors frequently lament their students' lack of focus or investment in the educational process. The advent of distance learning and online courses has increased the concern of many educators who fear technology will only exacerbate the deterioration of the sense of "community" that community colleges represent. However, there are communication techniques which can promote and enrich the learning experience in both the conventional classroom and online courses.

Many community college students can be classified as "fragile" – relatively unsure of their skills and marginally invested in their education. A sense of recognition by their instructor is often the most important bond they have with the educational process, and that relationship helps them persevere until they develop an independent sense of purpose. One communication technique which gives students an unmistakable sense of worth is a personal note from the instructor. This note can be quite short, but it establishes a concrete one-on-one acknowledgment of the student by his or her instructor. Of course, certain classes - especially classes involving writing-lend themselves to more

personalized comments, but any instructor can acknowledge a student's improvement or express concern about a student's lack of progress. If the instructor chooses to communicate with students individually throughout the semester, these notes can be attached to a returned test or paper. However, some instructors may choose to devote a few hours to writing notes to an entire class and distribute them at one time. Instructors teaching online courses can have the notes mailed through the college. The note-writing time does not need to be oppressive. A template which accommodates stationary-sized paper can be created in any word processing program. Because the notes are designed to be positive and supportive, they need only contain general expressions of confidence or concern. These notes often become a tangible verification of students' sometimes-elusive educational goals.

Email can be a very effective and popular form of communication in online courses as well as conventional classes. An email note is a relatively instant way to respond to a student's performance. It is perhaps the most efficient means of establishing the sense of recognition that is so vitally important to students. In a conventional classroom, the instructor can request that students include their email addresses on one of the first assignments. The sense of

"community" is enhanced if the instructor provides his or her email address at the time of the request. In online courses, such information would be a matter of record, but it is important for the instructor to initiate communication with each student early in the semester, even if the note is only a quick greeting. With that element of communication established, any other email correspondence is comfortable and convenient.

Second only to the sense of connection between student and instructor is the sense of connection between individual students. A conventional classroom setting provides the opportunity for developing a sense of belonging, but the same dynamics which foster interaction and involvement in some students can hinder those qualities in others. The reality is that some students respond positively to the presence of others and perform well in that arena; others, however, are intimidated by the situation and become even more inhibited. Once again, technology can manipulate some of these ingredients and allow more students to make a personal contribution to the class. Many classes lend themselves to projects involving small groups or even pairs. In those situations, the instructor can post "project partners" on a web site and assign specific topics for each pair or group to explore. The students can work online and

communicate through email as they explore their topic. Because many community college students are relatively unfamiliar with computers and the Internet, this is a good way to guide their early experiences. If the instructor asks which students have good computer skills, he or she can pair students with more knowledge with those who have less. Fascination with the Internet and email make this a particularly inviting assignment. The instructor can also email the students during this project to encourage them in their work.

Online courses work particularly well with partners or groups. During one week, for example, specifically paired students can investigate assigned questions. They can then post their findings or perspectives on a bulletin board for other students in the class to read and respond to. The instructor can change the pairings several times during the semester to give students a variety of opportunities to contribute with others. Because students with Internet skills are usually eager to share their knowledge with others, they can help several different partners during the course of a semester. Those with weaker skills feel less intimidated learning from another student, so the skill level of the entire class generally increases.

Digital cameras offer another medium for interaction in online classes. If the course requires at least one initial classroom meeting, the instructor can use part of that time to take individual pictures and one class picture with a digital camera. These photos can be included in the web page for that class, and during the semester students can put a "face" to an email address if they want to. In addition to being able to see the faces of their classmates, the students can also see their instructor, and that enhances the feeling of belonging to the class. A sense of "connectedness" is not vital only for students; instructors for online courses also have an easier time visualizing their students with the digital pictures. When instructors communicate with students throughout the semester, pictures help them cultivate a sense of the person behind the email address.

Finally, chat rooms offer students in conventional classes and online classes an inviting, nonthreatening opportunity to be involved in relevant discussions with classmates. They can be incorporated in the requirements for a conventional class as a means of fostering open communication between students or between students and instructors. Chat rooms also offer the closest approximation to a conventional classroom discussion for students in online courses. As such, they become a valuable link between isolated students and the community college.